



PHOTOS BY TILKE ELKINS

Nicholas Walker and James Stegall

MONEY WHERE THE MOUTH IS

Craft distillery Wide Mouth Spirits preps for launch BY AARON RAGAN-FORE

I'm standing in Nicholas Walker's sunny Springfield kitchen on a Tuesday morning in February, swirling a stemmed glass containing a cloudy concoction that looks suspiciously like a thick shot of grape juice. The liquid is a cr me de cacao chocolate infusion, a planned offering of Wide Mouth Spirits, LLC, the nascent brainchild of Walker and business partner James Stegall.

Both of the men glance at me expectantly as I raise the glass to my lips, but I'm a bit dubious. I usually go for something a bit more butch — a shot of Maker's Mark, say — and I've never quite trusted dessert liqueurs. But the nectar goes down smooth and sharp and just a little tart, and I quickly ask for another belt. A small one. It's not even lunchtime.

Artistic collaboration is nothing new to Stegall and Walker, who first teamed up last year for an AM radio theater program. The two realized they were kindred spirits, and when Walker saw a niche for flavorful, organic, craft-distilled liquor

with a distinctive "flavor library" derived from Willamette Valley produce, he knew Stegall would be his first call.

The fledgling enterprise plans to seek organic certification from Oregon Tilth and to obtain all base products within a 100-mile radius. Walker is looking forward to forging links at Eugene Saturday Market this spring. "I'm interested in creating a relationship with the local farmer who's producing all this stuff," he says.

Stegall and Walker will package their products in reusable wide mouth Mason jars. The containers not only provide the company with a cool name and old-fashioned moonshinin' cachet, they're also perfect to re-task for storage after the contents are consumed. "My fridge is full of reused Mason jars," Walker says.

Stegall says he anticipated Wide Mouth might encounter resistance from established players in the growing field of craft distillers and brewers. "That's the sense, that people hold onto this information and don't want to give it away," he says. But happily, Wide

Mouth's future competitors seem pleased to welcome the new distillers on the block. Stegall credits Eugene's Ninkasi Brewing and Portland's House Spirits as being especially helpful.

It's fitting that Stegall and Walker are collaborating on something tangible after their time together on the airwaves. Each has experience home brewing and enjoys the hands-on aspect of distilling. "I feel that creating physical things is a grounding experience for me," says Walker, who concerns himself with the virtual world of patent application writing by day.

Stegall, who also owns a small printing imprint that produces hand-stitched books, looks forward to when he can focus more on refinement than red tape. "When you get to craft, there can be more art to it," Stegall muses. "I want to turn the valve and watch the liquor pour out."

The company plans an assertive "pour out" of products as well: The partners plan to unveil a line of vodkas, a gin and infusions this spring; brandy is on the horizon one year

out, whiskey is four to six years distant, and there's even a little early talk of merchandising — Mason jar-shaped shot glasses, anyone? On top of it all, Stegall and Walker envision teaming with local restaurants to help design signature cocktails.

But for now the Wide Mouth guys will have to content themselves with navigating the bureaucratic maze of location scouting, permit applications, fire codes and drainage plumbing. And then there's the little matter of procuring a 9-foot-tall, 200-gallon copper still. In all, the duo estimates they'll drop \$20,000 in startup costs, mostly invested by friends and family, before they turn enough profit to fill a Mason jar with nickels.

Wide Mouth's primary focus will be ensuring that both business and distillation are just as transparent as their cocoa-tinged elixir is opaque. "It feels like it's important for someone consuming our product to see every step of the process," says Walker. "They can take care of the process after it leaves the bottle." ■

Visit www.widemouthspirits.com for more information.